

Caricatures of Men of Science

by E. C. WATSON

A PHILOSOPHER may seem out of place in this series devoted to men of science, but Herbert Spencer's appearance here can be justified on at least two counts. First, he exerted a tremendous influence during his lifetime (1820-1903) upon English thought—and thus upon science. Secondly, the contrast between Spencer's caricature (and the written account which accompanies it) and those of the contemporary scientists which have already been reproduced in this series only serves to emphasize the respect accorded to science and scientists during the Victorian period.

As the philosopher of the great scientific movement of the second half of the nineteenth century, Spencer's doctrines were attacked from both sides—by the philosophers and by the scientists. His work coincided in time with the great development of biology under the stimulus of Darwin's theory, and it was Spencer who contributed to that theory the phrase "survival of the fittest."

In 1860 he published a prospectus of a new system of philosophy which would embrace the general principles of all existing knowledge. Though he gave most of the rest of his life to the development of this philosophy, his attempt to synthesize all scientific knowledge could hardly help but fail. Because he lived at the beginning of a period of unparalleled scientific activity, he could not possibly sum up and estimate its total production.

The caricature at the right and the acid appraisal of Spencer below appeared in *Vanity Fair* for April 26, 1879.

"Herbert Spencer holds the present greatest name among the philosophers. He is scarcely known in his own country outside the circles of fogies, but abroad he enjoys a wonderful reputation as the leader of all modern thought. He was born nine-and-fifty years ago,



Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), philosopher of science

the son of a schoolmaster, who strove to culture him with the classics, and to make of him a civil engineer. But young Spencer resisted Greek and Latin, and soon renounced engineering. He was, and knew himself to be, powerful with the pen; so he became a writer. He learnt to handle a good plain English of the frigid sort. In a casual way he published articles on Government, Education, and other dull subjects, from the time he was one-and-twenty. But when Darwin invented Evolution, Evolution invented Herbert Spencer, who saw how the notion might be applied to psychologic problems. So he now addressed himself to pure philosophy, and began to publish distressing tomes. He fell foul of Comte and of Mill, and plunged about with atoms and monads in such fashion as made all men see that he must have a philosophy of his own. As nobody could well understand him his reputation waxed mightily. He is now the one recognised authority on 'Sociology'; he has discovered that 'ultimate scientific ideas are all representatives of realities that cannot be comprehended,' and that man of science 'knows that in its ultimate essence nothing can be known.' Yet he goes on writing.

"Mr. Herbert Spencer is believed by many to be a companionable, cheerful man. He has been more than once to a shareholders' meeting to war with railway directors; he delights also in children; and he holds that suicides should rather be encouraged. Yet he goes on living."